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SUBJECT: SECURITY AND HUMANITARIAN SITUATION IN SHABUNDA
AND MWENGA, SOUTH KIVU

Summary

¶1. (U) In general, security and humanitarian access have significantly improved in Shabunda and Mwenga territories over the past few years. Long-term security issues in these territories are caused by the activities of dissident Mai Mai groups rather than the actions of the FDLR. Particularly since the capture in February of dissident Mai Mai commander Major Alexander, residents have begun to move relatively freely and to engage in various livelihood activities. However, security has deteriorated recently in the northern part of both territories due to arrivals of FDLR fleeing FARDC/MONUC attacks on FDLR positions in Kalehe Territory. These retreating elements have attacked local populations and caused new displacements estimated at 30,000 people. Some Mwenga and Shabunda residents wonder what purpose MONUC and FARDC think they are serving in attacking FDLR, since such operations often result only in the movement of FDLR from one place to another and thus spread insecurity rather than diminish it. END SUMMARY

Background

¶2. (U) This is the first of two communications reporting observations made by USAID/OFDA Rep Victor Bushamuka during a visit to Shabunda and Mwenga Territories March 22 to 29. The objective of the visit was to assess the security and humanitarian situation in the area. During the visit, OFDA Rep met with civilian and military authorities, humanitarian actors in the territories, IDPs, residents, and FDLR combatants.

¶3. (U) Mwenga and Shabunda are territories in South Kivu province, located 94km southwest and 200km west of Bukavu respectively. These territories have suffered extensive Mai Mai and FDLR activities since the start of the war in ¶1998. During most of the 1998-2003 DRC-Rwanda war, the two main towns of Shabunda and Mwenga were occupied by the forces of the Rassemblement Congolais pour la Democratie

(RCD), a then Rwanda-backed ex-rebel movement, while the rest of the territories were controlled by Mai Mai and FDLR troops.

14. (U) With the formation of the transitional government in 2003, the RCD and Mai Mai forces in the areas were theoretically merged into two FARDC brigades, the 120th in Shabunda and the 107th in Mwenga. The merger has not yet been fully realized as each group has in fact kept control of the territory it occupied during the war and there has been minimal mixing of the troops.

15. (U) Though FDLR populations reside in Shabunda and Mwenga Territories, insecurity over the past two years has been caused mostly by dissident Mai Mai. In 2005, Mai Mai commanders in Shabunda and Mwenga refused an order by military authorities to go to "brassage" (mixing) integration camps, saying they did not want to leave their areas of control open to a take over by ex-RCD troops. Furthermore, Mai Mai commander Major Alexander of Shabunda said that he would consider integration only if he were given the rank of general in the FARDC, something which he has not been offered. Since then, Major Alexander's group has been one of the main sources of insecurity in Shabunda, creating several displacements of the population during multiple skirmishes with FARDC troops. The most recent confrontation was in January-February 2006 in the localities of Bakisi, Katchunga, Lumba, and Lugungu. The fighting was believed to have displaced about 3,000 families into the forest, but some of these eventually made their way south toward Shabunda center.

Shabunda

16. (U) The dissident Mai Mai commander Major Alexander was captured by FARDC in February 2006 in north Shabunda. However, some residents of Shabunda are still skeptical of how effective the arrest will be in improving security since Alexander's followers are still at large in the forest. The dissident Mai Mai are believed to be concentrated around Kiseku southeast of Shabunda town. Nonetheless, since the capture of Alexander, there have been no more attacks by this group on FARDC positions or the civilian population.

17. (U) Shabunda residents feel differently regarding the ex-RCD-dominated FARDC brigade present in the territory, depending on whether they are from the north of the territory or the south. For people living north of the river Ulindi, the former Mai Mai stronghold area, Shabunda will be considered insecure as long as ex-RCD troops remain in control of it. These villagers are often accused by FARDC of collaborating with dissident Mai Mai in the forest, and are anxious to see the ex-RCD troops replaced by an integrated brigade or a non-ex-RCD brigade.

18. (U) On the other hand, people living south of the river are satisfied with the performance of the 120th brigade of FARDC, particularly for capturing Alexander and stopping the frequent Mai Mai attacks on civilians. Despite the difference in opinion between the two populations, there is a consensus among both groups that security in the territory is generally better now than it has been since 1998. Many indicated that they are able to grow crops without fear of looting by armed groups.

19. (U) One area where security has deteriorated is the northeast corner of the territory where Shabunda borders Kalehe Territory. Some FDLR combatants fleeing the ongoing joint FARDC-MONUC offensive in Kalonge, Bunyakiri, and around Kahuzi Biega National Park have moved west into Shabunda Territory. These retreating FDLR have established checkpoints in Byangama and Kigulube where each person passing through is requested to pay \$2 or the equivalent in goods. Cow traders are also required to pay \$5 for each cow. Surprisingly, people going through the checkpoint

seem not to mind paying for their passage. According to our interlocutors, no harm comes to people as long as these fees are paid. However, a large presence of FDLR in the area worries residents due to a possible FARDC-MONUC attack on the FDLR. As a result, some of the villages near where FDLR have resettled are now deserted. It is not yet clear where the estimated 12,000 inhabitants of these villages have gone.

¶10. (U) FARDC authorities in Shabunda are aware of these checkpoints, but admitted to OFDA Rep that they were unable to intervene due to a lack of troops. The 120th brigade in Shabunda, which used to have over 2,500 troops, now has fewer than 800 members. A large part of the brigade has gone to the brassage process. The remaining force is not enough to assure protection of a vast territory such as Shabunda.

Mwenga

¶11. (U) Mwenga has been calm over most of the past year despite a heavy presence of FDLR, who established bases in the territory at the beginning of the 1998-2003 war. Among the well-known FDLR bases in Mwenga are Isopo, Kigalama, Kakanga, Ngandu, Kirungutwe, Kalame, Kalambi, and Kasika. Mwenga FDLR elements have been coexisting peacefully with local populations for several years now and even cultivate their own fields and are producing food both for consumption and sale in local markets.

¶12. (U) The current confrontations between FARDC/MONUC and FDLR and Mai Mai dissidents in Bunyakiri and Kalonge in the territory of Kalehe have, however, negatively affected the security situation in northern Mwenga. Some retreating FDLR and Mai Mai from Kalehe have found their way to Mwenga, increasing the already high number of FDLR in the

territory. These recent arrivals are believed to be concentrated in Kitamba, Kigongo, and Ngando in northern Mwenga. In fear of a potential FARDC/MONUC attack on their bases, the FDLR of Mwenga also deserted their bases, retreating several kilometers deeper into the forest and abandoning their crops and other livelihood activities. These abandoned FDLR fields were looted in January-February by FARDC soldiers passing through on foot on their way to the integration ("brassage") camp in Luberizi.

¶13. (U) As a consequence of FDLR in Mwenga losing their crops and other livelihood activities, the relationship with the local population has deteriorated, with multiple FDLR attacks on villagers registered in the past two months. The attacks often include looting, kidnapping, and raping of women, and have instigated massive population movements. OFDA Rep visited several localities including Kalumba, Kisube, and Bikute, comprised normally of 19,000 inhabitants, that are now empty.

¶14. (U) Forest areas, which used to be the safe haven for most Mwenga residents fleeing armed confrontations, are now an FDLR stronghold. In addition, many residents believe that the dissident Mai Mai group of "Colonel 106" has also moved to Mwenga from Kahuzi-Biega National Park. As a result, the forests of Mwenga are now viewed as one of the most dangerous areas in the territory and population displacements are now mainly towards the main towns including Kamituga and Mwenga center. Although the exact number of IDPs in these towns has not yet been determined, the administrator of the territory estimates the population of Kamituga to have doubled from the 16,000 inhabitants estimated to be living there in 2003.

Future Prospects

¶15. (U) Residents of villages located near where the FDLR have taken refuge have begun to pay for their security. Each household is requested to contribute about a kilo of cassava flour and half kilo of beans per week to the FDLR through their village chiefs. Many households that are unable to contribute have left the area in fear of retribution. Similarly, many villages within 10 km of the town of Kamituga have requested protection from FARDC and have agreed to contribute food and money to the patrolling soldiers and their commanders in town.

Civilian Discontent

¶16. (U) Civilians that OFDA Rep spoke with in Mwenga and Shabunda questioned the value of the current joint FARDC/MONUC operations against FDLR in Kalehe Territory. They observe that when under attack, FDLR elements move to new areas, principally Mwenga and Shabunda, and that insecurity thus spreads and increases rather than decreases.
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